

## Bloedel Plant Profile – The Snowflake Aralia



One of the most remarkable trees in Bloedel is one of the tallest. It is also one of the least noticed. At the far end of the bridge, on the inner side, there is a prickly pale brown trunk. The trick here is to look up. The Snowflake aralia, or Snowflake tree, has huge leaves, 75 cm/2½ ft across. They look like giant snowflakes cut out of green paper.

The tree is native to India, Southern China and South East Asia. In the wild, it grows to 8 metres/27 feet. It is an understory tree, growing below taller trees. The perforated leaves help it grow in shade. How? Whole ‘solid’ leaves would completely shade those below and the lower leaves would die. By having light pass through the gaps, more layers of leaves survive. The total amount of light absorbed by overlapping layers of perforated leaves is greater than would be the case of just one ‘solid’ layer.



The trunk has tiny prickles. These sharp outgrowths deter animals from browsing on the young plant. As additional protection, the petiole, the stalk attaching the leaf to the stem, is often prickly.<sup>1</sup>

One oddity about the Snowflake aralia is that it is both edible *and* poisonous. The flowers appear under the leaves and look like balls of daisies.<sup>2</sup> The cooked flower buds are edible. The fruit is a fish poison. Fish are easier to catch when stupefied by a paste of the pounded Snowflake aralia fruits in their water.<sup>3</sup> This ginseng relative has been a part of Chinese medicine for centuries.<sup>4</sup> The young shoots are a food, a medicine and an antiseptic.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/home-property/nz-gardener/73094097/null>

<sup>2</sup> [https://nsetropicals.com/store/p73/Snowflake aralia - Trevesia palmata.html](https://nsetropicals.com/store/p73/Snowflake_aralia_-_Trevesia_palmata.html)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.floridaforaging.com/plant/trevesia-palmata>

<sup>4</sup> <https://myemail.constantcontact.com/News-from-Garden-America---July-7.html?soid=1102919617524&aid=2SmudxhTXx0>



Old colonial era photographs from the tropics often show people wearing ‘pith helmets’. The pith from the stems of the Snowflake aralia is one of several plant sources for the lightweight insulating pith.<sup>5</sup> Snowflake aralia pith is not as good as that obtained from the Sola<sup>6</sup> plant, *Aeschynomene aspera*.<sup>7</sup>

The Snowflake aralia has the Latin name of *Trevesia palmata*. The genus name *Trevesia* is to honour the family Treves of the Bonfili of Padua. They were great supporters of botanical research.<sup>8</sup> ‘*Palmata*’ was from an earlier name for the plant ‘*Gastonia palmata*’. The *Gastonia* genus is now obsolete. When, in 1842, the

plants’ genus became *Trevesia*; the ‘*palmata*’ part of the name went with it. ‘*Palmata*’ means “having five or more veins arising from one point, hand-shaped, referring to the lobed leaves that look like a hand”.<sup>9</sup>

The Snowflake aralia makes a good houseplant.<sup>10</sup> It has tiny scented flowers. Planted in pots and kept indoors this species does not need much sunlight. It is a hardy indoor plant that can tolerate a very wide range of home environments from full sunshine to dark corners. This plant prefers a drained and fairly moist ground.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <http://hatguide.co.uk/pith-helmet/>

<sup>6</sup> Giving the common name for the pith helmet as ‘Sola topi’, or ‘Sola hat’ – ‘Sola’ is not related to the word ‘Solar’

<sup>7</sup> <http://tropical.theferns.info/viewtropical.php?id=Trevesia+palmata>

<sup>8</sup> <http://outlawgarden.blogspot.com/2014/09/trevesia-palmata-is-my-favorite.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://florafaunaweb.nparks.gov.sg/special-pages/plant-detail.aspx?id=4801>

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.gardenamerica.com/store/pages.php?pageid=370&mode=preview&utm\\_source=Garden+America+Newsletter+July+7%2C+2017&utm\\_campaign=7%2F7%2F17&utm\\_medium=email](http://www.gardenamerica.com/store/pages.php?pageid=370&mode=preview&utm_source=Garden+America+Newsletter+July+7%2C+2017&utm_campaign=7%2F7%2F17&utm_medium=email)

<sup>11</sup> [https://toptropicals.com/catalog/uid/Trevesia\\_palmata.htm](https://toptropicals.com/catalog/uid/Trevesia_palmata.htm)